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THE FUTURE FOR AFRICA: HOPE OR DESPAIR

The causes contributing to Africa's present predicament are many and complex. Simple solutions are not perceptible. One is tempted to suggest for Africa the measures by which India emerged from massive dependence upon external aid. India, however, is a sovereign nation with a government able to integrate its impressive intellectual and institutional resources towards a common purpose.

The 39 African nations south of the Sahara in common suffer many adversities: widespread poverty - the poorest 29 are among the least developed nations which qualify for IDA loans; millions of displaced persons; low per capita food production - 20% of their people are fed by food imports even in non-drought years; the highest average rate of population increase - 3.2% per annum; heavy dependence upon single export commodities - cotton in Sudan, tobacco in Malawi, coffee in Ethiopia, cocoa in Ghana; worst of all, a massive external debt, in the five poorest Sahelian countries equivalent to 94% of their combined GDP.

Coexistent are immense diversities. Annual rainfall increases from 10 mm to 1600 mm between the latitudes of 20° and 10° north of the equator. Physical size ranges from 2,000 to 2.5 M km<sup>2</sup> between Mauritius and Sudan. Average life expectancy (overall 49 years) varies from 61 in Botswana to 37 in Sierra Leone; infant mortality from 32 in Mauritius to 200 per thousand in the Gambia, all four being former British colonies. Sometime French colonies lead and trail in per capita GNP, with Gabon \$3900 and Chad \$80 USD.

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The persistent decline in per capita food production and income, each more than 20% since 1970, together with the enormous debt give cause for greatest alarm. From 1975 to 1985 total debt rose from \$15 billion to \$80 billion USD; annual debt service payments from \$450 million to \$6.8 billion, equivalent to over 60% of all export earnings. For many Africans drought simply converted crisis into catastrophe.

It is convenient to charge present adversity to earlier maladministration. Indeed, in retrospect, some African governments appear to have made unwise policy decisions and resource allocations. But Africans can hardly be blamed for the escalation in energy costs and interest rates, which concurrent with depressed prices for their export commodities devastated their economies over the past decade. Since in total the African debt is much lower than Latin America's, it seems not to excite the Wall Street indigestion index, and commercial banks appear less disposed to reschedule the African than the Latin American debt service payments.

Massive human migrations within and among African nations have destabilized their economies and added to their poverty. Not unrelated is the appalling annual waste of \$14 billion on armaments, some from a genuinely felt need for self-protection, some to prevent the intrusion of political alternatives. Nonetheless, not a little can be laid at the doors of the merchants of death. Superpower donors, in their assistance to developing countries, admit ever-increasing proportions of security aid which, ungoblygooked, means dumping weapons of war. Those who create new weapons have obsolescent models to dispose of. Though armament lobbies may protest that they don't create conflicts, they do little to discourage them. Napoleon said his army marched on its stomach. Today's armies march heavily on the stomachs of the world's rural poor.

Despite the extremely favourable balances of trade that most wealthy nations enjoy over the poorer, few donors seem disposed to increase constructive aid flows. Over the past decade, many donors have changed from sustaining grants to essential institutions, to the support of shorter term individually less expensive projects. Projects are more easily monitored but their proliferation has placed an immense administrative burden upon ill-equipped, inexperienced bureaucracies. For example, in one African nation of modest resources, there are 614 projects financed by 69 separate donors, each in varying degrees manifesting the donor's particular persuasion of priorities, accounting and administrative procedures.

Happily one discerns refreshing winds of change. African governments appear willing to analyze past errors of judgement and to reorder their priorities. Zimbabwe was ready with packages of seed, fertilizer and tools when the rains returned. Stimulated by crop price incentives Zimbabwe's smallholders responded with a 30% increase in cereal production. Africa's Priority Program for Economic Recovery, confirmed by the OAU in July 1985, prescribes investment in agriculture up to 25% of national budgets.

African and donor governments alike seem now to recognize agriculture as the essential engine of economic development. Prompted by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, of which IDRC and CIDA were founding members, a consortium of donors, in concert with Africans, is formulating a special program for African agricultural research. The nine nations that comprise the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) are pursuing a collective program of regional food security, agricultural research and development.

But for these measures to deliver the benefits envisioned requires first relief of the staggering debt burden through: substantial forgiveness of the outstanding debt; rescheduling over longer periods with reduced interest rates; repayment in local currencies on condition the money generated be disbursed for long-term social and economic development.

Over the past year, throughout the world, people responded with admirable benevolence to relieve the distress of Africans afflicted by famine. Drought doubtless will return; famine need not.

Can one hope that memories of the miseries endured and the compassion they inspired will bring a reordering of priorities among governments of both African and donor nations? If the former will dedicate themselves to food security and agricultural development; if donors will commit themselves to enlightened and sustained development assistance, Africans can come to enjoy the security and degree of human dignity which is every person's birthright.

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Footnote: the above is an extract from a presentation made to the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, England. The author Joseph H. Hulse, is Vice-President Research Programs at the International Development Research Centre. The opinions expressed are those of the author.